

Between Covenant and Cross

"What does a spirituality of the blood look like when viewed through the experience of reconciliation? To go back to the Scripture passages cited earlier from Colossians and Ephesians, God has reconciled the world through Christ, making peace through the blood of the cross. It is in Christ that God offers us reconciliation. It is a reconciliation inscribed on Jesus' own body. He experienced abandonment by the Twelve, he was tortured and cruelly executed. Yet in the vision of Luke he experiences God's presence, his Father's presence, and calls upon his Father to forgive, and then commends his spirit to his Father. The reconciliation that Christ offers to us, as the peace of God, Jesus gives us through his own experience. In asking God to forgive and engaging in an act of trust, we find Jesus himself within the circle of reconciliation. The tender heart of grief, disappointed and abused, becomes, in John's version of the story, the source of new life: water and blood, baptism and eucharist.

The peace who Christ is for us comes through the blood of the cross, Colossians tells us. That blood carries two profound meanings that open up the view for us upon our spirituality. First, it is the blood of suffering. Through the suffering of Jesus, who knew no sin, the enormity of all the evil in the world is taken up. Thus the pain we undergo in betrayal and abuse is taken utterly seriously by God. It is not forgotten. But it is transformed. Again, the body of Jesus, in John's account, bears witness to that. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples utterly transformed, but the wounds of his torture are still there. They are not discounted or glossed over. But they become for Thomas a source of life, of faith in Jesus. They are no longer just wounds.

Which brings us to the second meaning the reconciling blood offers our spirituality. It is the blood of new life, the new creation. As a symbol of the very life of God within us, of the *shalom* of God, it both points to and nourishes the vision of a reconciled humanity. Best envisioned in the cup of blessing it praises God and looks to the fulfillment of all things in Christ, when all will be reconciled in and through him (Ephesians 1, 17-20; II Cor. 5,17).

In Precious Blood spirituality, reconciliation marks out the space between the covenant and the cross, between the center of our lives and its margins. A spirituality of the covenant emphasizes themes of belonging; God has made us a special people through Christ's blood. Covenant is about commitment, about care, about hospitality. It creates a life-giving center where people are valued and celebrated. It is a true sanctuary in our lives: a holy place and a place of refuge.

A spirituality of the cross begins "outside the gates," in the garbage dump where only the marginalized, those who do not belong are found. The cross marks the place of their suffering and their exclusion. A spirituality of the cross is a spirituality of solidarity and witness: solidarity with the victims and witness to the injustice that is being perpetrated. It is a spirituality of waiting and attending to those who suffer.

The twofold meaning of the reconciling blood as the blood of suffering and the blood of the new creation give shape to a spirituality of reconciliation. We have seen how God's reconciling activity takes place in, first, the life of the victim, and then the life of the evildoer. But what is a ministry of reconciliation? What is it for those of us who may not have suffered deep harm in our lives, yet know God's love?

Not everyone has been wounded so deeply as to have the full experience of reconciliation described above. But Paul's point in his writing is that, in sin, we have all undergone it. The experience of God's loving and gracious presence in our lives is an epiphany of that reconciling grace. We all share in that through baptism. We live it out in spiritualities of the covenant, the cross and the cup. But what does a spirituality of reconciliation bring to all of this? And how is this ministry carried out?

It must be remembered that it is God who brings about reconciliation, we only assist in it. To that end, in the same passage from Second Corinthians, Paul calls those who exercise the ministry of reconciliation "ambassadors" on behalf of Christ. Our ministry, then, must be a witness to what God is working toward in and through the world.

The ministry of reconciliation takes place in the space between covenant and cross, between the sanctuary and the desolate place outside the gates. It is found on that pathway from sanctuary to cross, the Way of the Cross, the *Via Dolorosa*, the path of sorrow.

There are so many people in our world that are being driven along sorrow's pathway, bearing the burdens of their humiliation and anguish. Ministers of reconciliation, like the women disciples in the passion story, accompany those so burdened, realizing that they cannot lift away their sorrow. But like those women, they can be with them all the way, offering small comforts, sharing their grief. And once outside the gates, the victims are not abandoned.

Similarly, if we, as ministers of reconciliation, go the entire way in solidarity and care like the women who did not abandon Jesus, we also know the way back to the sanctuary, to the center. We can accompany those who have suffered on their journey back to the center. By having stayed with the victims in their time of desolation, we can be part of their finding their sanctuaries.

What does such accompaniment mean concretely? While we cannot bring about reconciliation ourselves, we can help create the conditions that make it possible. Along that Way of the Cross we can create stations of listening and care. Part of the healing process for many victims is repeating over and over the story of what has happened to them. It is as though that is the only way to break the grip of the lie on their lives. Their story must be repeated over and over until it can be told a different way. By listening, we help create the conditions for experiencing trust and, in turn, trusting once again.

Another way of engaging in this ministry is creating communities of covenant where belonging and trust are visible and celebrated. Victims welcomed into such communities get a glimpse of the reconciliation that awaits them.

Struggles for justice are part of this ministry. To acknowledge the wrongdoing done and to lament it, like the women along that first Way of the Cross, is to recognize the enormity of what has been done, and not let it be twisted into a lie that presents itself as the truth.

The ways of the Cross in our world are many. They run not just from Jerusalem to Calvary, but through the streets of our cities and towns. They run through our very homes. As ministers of reconciliation under the sign of the blood of Christ, we move between covenant and cross, between the place of the sanctuary and the desolate place outside the gates. Without the cross, the sense of belonging in the sanctuary can wither to a mere coziness. The vision of reconciliation, and the ministry along that way to the cross and back into the city, grows out of a deep conviction that God is reconciling the world, even though it is apparent that there is still so much deeply wrong with it. Those who were far off can be brought near. Those who have been deeply alienated from themselves and others once close to them can regain the most precious elements of their humanity that have been taken from them. There is a new creation, flowing from the wounded side of Christ (John 19:34).

(Fr. Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., "Between Covenant and Cross", The Wine Cellar, October 1994, pp. 11-15)